



OKLAHOMA STATEWIDE
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LEADING CHANGE. DELIVERING CHOICE.

Reasons for Enrolling, Benefits & Challenges of Oklahoma's Virtual Charter Schools

OKLAHOMA STATEWIDE VIRTUAL CHARTER SCHOOL
BOARD

DATE: DECEMBER 19, 2017



THOMAS P. MILLER & ASSOCIATES

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About Thomas P. Miller and Associates (TPMA)

TPMA was commissioned by the Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board to conduct an independent study of the motivations for Oklahoma families enrolling students in virtual charter schools, and the benefits and challenges of virtual charter school attendance.

TPMA is a full-service consulting firm, empowering organizations and communities through strategic partnerships and informed solutions to create positive, sustainable change. TPMA is built on a foundation of experts in the fields of research, evaluation, education, workforce, and economic development. Our team has deep and broad experience in the fields of survey design and analysis, program evaluation, and youth and community programming. We regularly work with local and state governments, nonprofit organizations, workforce investment boards, educational institutions, and industry associations to enhance the value of communities, institutions, and companies across the United States.

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Project Background

The Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board (OSVCSB) contracted Thomas P. Miller & Associates (TPMA) to conduct a study on why families choose to enroll in virtual charter schools, as well as the benefits and challenges associated with virtual charter school attendance. During this study, TPMA conducted a survey of parents and guardians of virtual charter students and selected a sample of parents from all Oklahoma virtual charter schools for individual interviews.

A short survey was conducted in-house by the OSVCSB in 2016; based on those survey results, the board felt that a deeper external analysis using consistent methodology and more rigorous analysis was warranted. The intent of the OSVCSB in commissioning this analysis was to gain a deeper understanding on the needs of families whose children are enrolled in the virtual charter schools, so the schools can appropriately address those needs.

The schools that participated in this analysis include Epic Charter School, Insight School of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Connections Academy, and Oklahoma Virtual Charter Academy. TPMA directed efforts at survey and interview questionnaire design and conducted all analysis. In the process, TPMA ensured that OSVCSB and representatives from each of the four virtual charter schools had an opportunity to provide input on the research process.

The central research questions guiding TPMA throughout this project included:

- **What are the reasons that families choose full-time online education through virtual charter schools for their children?**
- **What are the perceived benefits of full-time online charter school attendance?**
- **What are the perceived challenges encountered by families in full-time online education?**

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Executive Summary

The Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board (OSVCSB) selected Thomas P. Miller & Associates to conduct a study of Oklahoma’s virtual charter schools, namely Epic Charter School, Insight School of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Connections Academy, and Oklahoma Virtual Charter Academy. More specifically, TPMA was tasked with investigating the experiences of parents and families enrolled in the charter schools from the decision to enroll, to the benefits experienced and challenges encountered while enrolled in one of the schools.

Following are some of the most relevant statistics and information gathered from TPMA’s primary research, including both a parent and guardian survey and in-depth interviews. These insights are organized according to the key research questions that guided the study.

Why do Families Choose Virtual Charter Schools?

- Parents and guardians are drawn to virtual charter schools due partly to negative experiences in prior educational settings and partly to the unique opportunities available via virtual education. Related to negative experiences, the top selections by survey respondents included “Bullying or threats from classmates at other schools” (41% of respondents); “Overcrowding or limited resources in other schools” (34%); and “Problems with staff or administration at other schools” (34%). Related to the unique opportunities of virtual education, respondents indicated “Opportunity for parental involvement” (31%); “Opportunity for acceleration or remediation” (31%); and “Particular learning need(s) of student” (29%). When asked to rank these reasons by level of importance, respondents rated students’ learning needs, medical needs, and health and safety as the most significant factors.
- Many parents and guardians of virtual charter school students are characterized by particularly high levels of engagement with their students’ education. Some families are drawn to the opportunity for their students to move at an accelerated pace, and/or allow their students time to pursue other non-academic interests. Other families are drawn to the opportunity for parents to provide one to one attention to students with particular learning needs or disabilities.

What Are the Perceived Benefits of Virtual Charter School Attendance?

- Survey respondents felt strongly that virtual charter schools provide a safe educational environment; accommodate student’s learning and health needs; and provide curriculum options that meet students’ needs. The fact that 77% of survey respondents believe virtual charter schools offer a “safe educational environment” is particularly important given the number of respondents who selected virtual charter schools in response to safety threats at brick and mortar educational environments.
- Parents, guardians and students typically see improvements in their student’s interest in school after enrolling in virtual charter schools—68% of survey respondents said that their student’s engagement increased since enrolling. Anecdotally, some interviewees shared stories about students who, for a variety of reasons, felt disengaged or even hopeless in brick and mortar schools but whose interest in schooling significantly improved after enrolling in a virtual charter school.

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- The benefits of virtual charter schools extend beyond safety, increased flexibility and the accommodations for learning needs. Sixty-three percent (63%) of survey respondents said that virtual charter schools are “significantly better” in academic quality compared to local in-person public schools, while less than 1% said that they were “significantly worse.” Interviewees echoed this point by saying that virtual charter schools allow their students to take a greater variety of classes and praised the quality of teachers within the virtual charter schools.

What Are the Challenges Encountered by Students at Virtual Charter Schools?

- Parents and guardians whose children attend virtual charter schools are generally satisfied with their schools. In fact, when asked to name their most significant challenges the largest proportion of survey respondents selected “Have not experienced challenges” (15%). However, there are common themes among those that express having challenges; most notably, 14% of survey respondents report the “lack of social opportunities” as a difficulty. Providing further context on these sentiments, interviewees indicated that they have trouble fulfilling students’ need for regular face-to-face interaction with peers. Similarly, multiple interviewees expressed a desire for more extracurricular opportunities.
- Parents and guardians generally believe the education offered by virtual charter schools to be high-quality and rigorous. For some students the material may be too challenging, however. For example, 10% of survey respondents indicated having “Academic struggles” and another 5% were challenged by “Workload.”
- Interviewees expressed that when initially enrolling in virtual charter schools, many lifestyle and behavioral adjustments are required of students and families. Students attending virtual charter schools have challenges understanding the schools’ software programs; staying focused and motivated; and overcoming the monotony of studying at a computer for long periods of time. In addition, many survey respondents indicated that, as a result of challenges associated with transitioning to a virtual charter school, their student(s) had fallen behind from the start and were unable to catch up with their studies. Thus, virtual charter schools can improve their services by improving technical interfaces, social opportunities, and responsiveness to parents’ issues. However, the overwhelming majority of parents and guardians expressed that virtual charter schools offer a high-quality education and provide benefits not offered by in-person public schools.

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Survey Research Summary

To engage parents and guardians of current Oklahoma virtual charter students, TPMA constructed and fielded an online survey. This survey was administered via email from October 11th through October 25th, 2017. It covered topics such as demographics, length of enrollment, and motivations for enrolling in a virtual charter school. For questions about student demographics, education needs, and student accommodations in virtual charter schools, parents and guardians who have several children in the virtual charter system were asked to focus on just one virtual charter student. This choice was made in order to get detailed feedback about students without duplicating the influence of responses that were more related to families’ experiences. However, respondents were also given the opportunity to share about their whole family’s experiences attending virtual charter schools, including the reason for enrollment, the benefits of attendance, and the challenges their students have experienced.

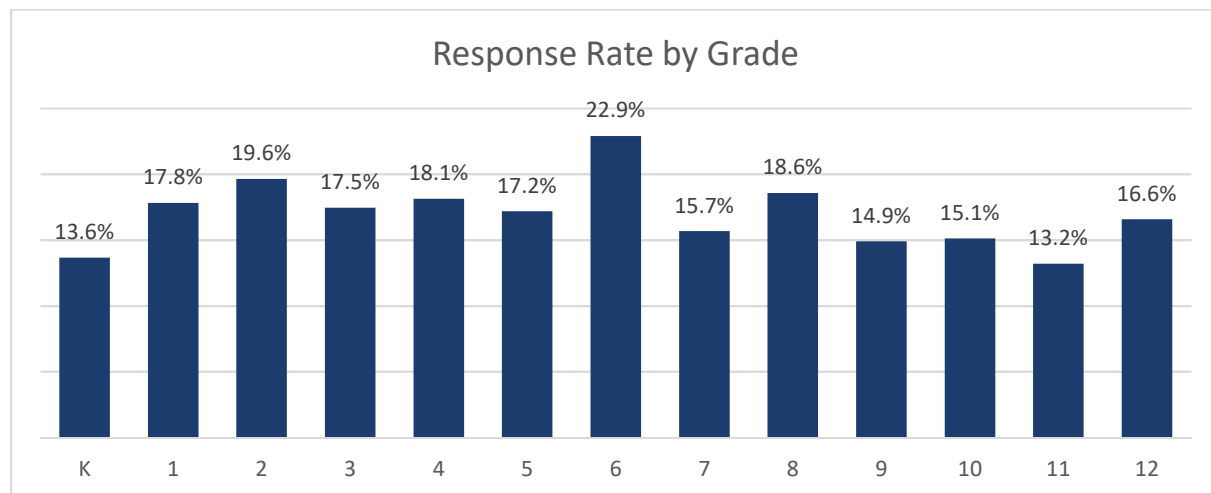
Once results were collected, survey data were cleaned to remove duplicate responses (i.e., parents who completed the survey more than once) and open-ended responses were coded into key themes for further analysis. Further details about the data analysis process are provided in [Appendix A](#).

Survey Response Statistics

A total of 2,021 qualified respondents completed the survey. Based on Oklahoma’s total 2017-2018 virtual charter school enrollment, this represents a 16.6% response rate, an amount large enough to provide the survey responses with a high degree of statistical validity. In addition, the responses adequately paralleled the virtual charter school student population across school, grade, and race/ethnicity. Further details on survey statistics are described in [Appendix A](#).

Distribution of Results

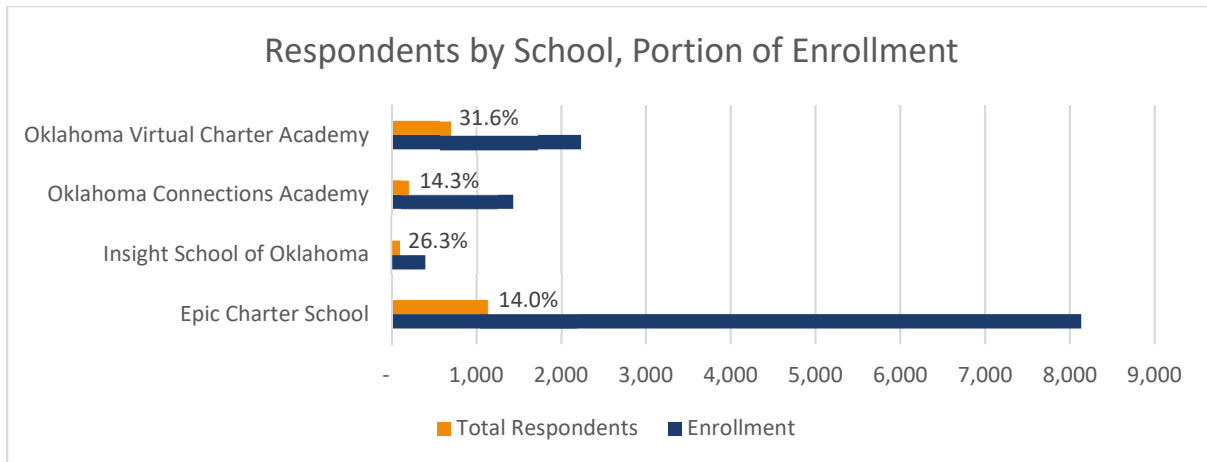
Based on 2016-2017 virtual charter school enrollment, between 13.2% and 22.9% of each grade’s total student population was captured in the survey results. The highest response rate was for families of 6th graders, while the lowest response rate was for families of 11th graders.



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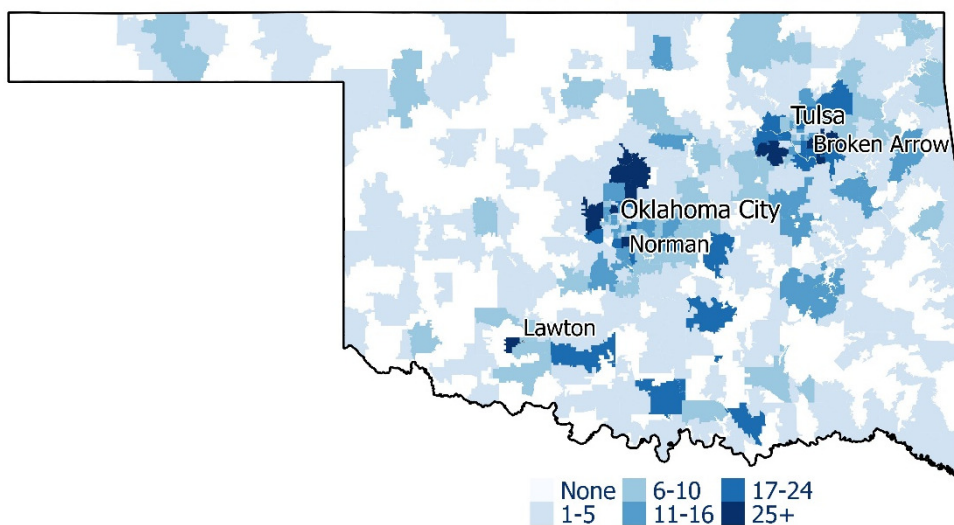
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All four virtual charter schools in the state are represented within the survey responses. No school of the four registered a response rate lower than 14.0%; in that range were both Epic Charter School (14.0%) and Oklahoma Connections Academy (14.3%). Oklahoma Virtual Charter Academy had the highest response rate with 31.6%, followed by Insight School of Oklahoma with 26.3%. Epic Charter School, the largest of Oklahoma’s virtual charter schools, had the largest number of survey responses, at 1,140.



The Oklahoma City and Tulsa metro areas had the largest number of respondents, but—as the map illustrates—responses were distributed across the state. In addition to the Tulsa and Oklahoma City metros, there were also many respondents in Southern Oklahoma. Rural areas were also represented well, as 26.7% of all respondents were located in rural areas. As shown in the table on the following page, the geographic locations of survey respondents were closely correlated with the geographic location of Oklahoma citizens, though there is a slightly higher degree of representation of respondents living in Oklahoma City, Tulsa and other metro areas.

Respondents by Student Zip Code

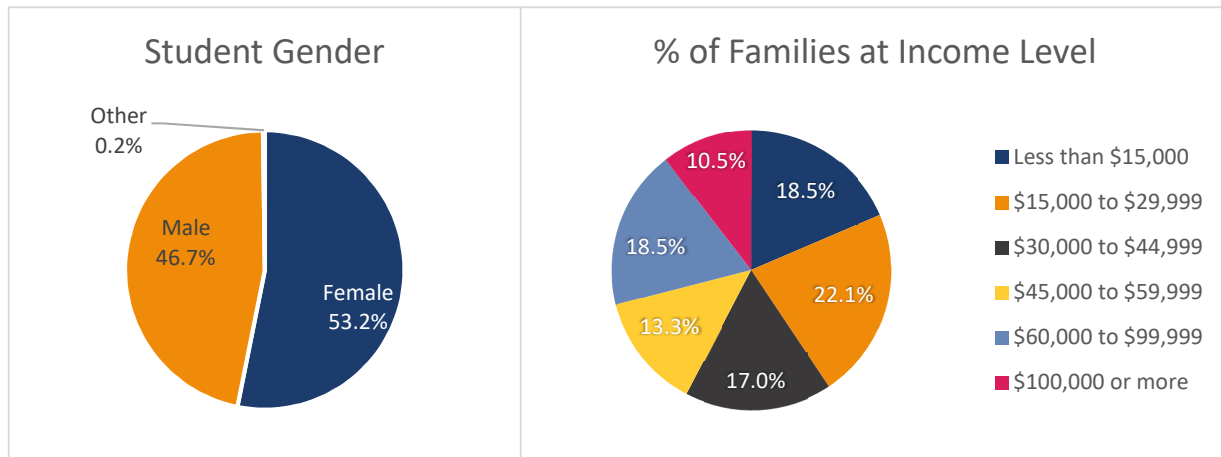


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Location	% of Respondents	% of Oklahoma’s Population
Rural Area	26.7%	33.7%
Oklahoma City Urban Area	25.9%	23.0%
Tulsa Urban Area	20.4%	17.5%
All Other Urban Areas	27.0%	25.8%

In terms of gender and income levels, survey results indicate that the virtual charter school population may differ slightly from statewide averages. First, of students whose gender was provided by survey respondents, 53.2% were female. In comparison, 51.3% of all children between the ages of 5 and 19 in the state of Oklahoma are male.¹ Second, survey results indicate that low income families are slightly more common within virtual charter student families than across the state. The survey indicates that 57.6% of respondent’s families’ have incomes below the Oklahoma median household income of \$48,038, whereas just 50% of families in the state have incomes below this level.²



Survey Results

The results of the survey provided meaningful information about key research questions, including the reasons that families choose virtual charter schools; the perceived benefits of charter-school attendance; and the challenges encountered by families with children in virtual charter schools. In the analysis that follows, specific results are explored based on each of these questions, followed by a summary of pertinent results from other questions in the survey. In general, survey respondents were very positive about their experiences with virtual charter schools, but they also shared a few specific challenges that may be unique to virtual charter school attendance.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau (2010). Decennial Census. Table QT-P1.

² U.S. Census Bureau (2016). American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

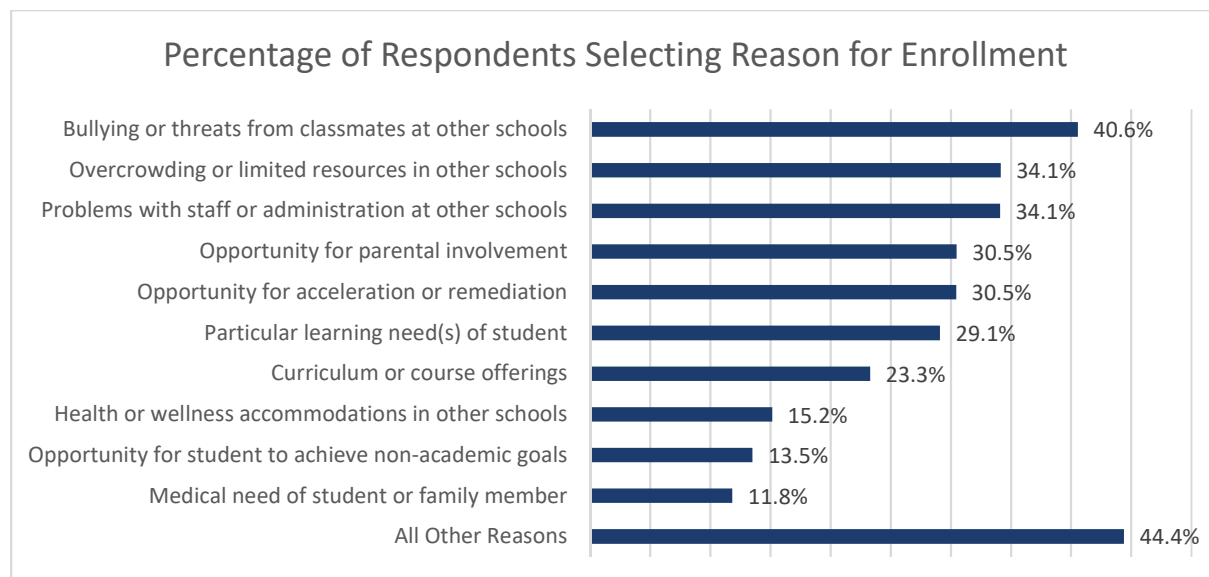
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Why Do Families Choose Virtual Charter Schools?

Respondents were allowed to select as many reasons as they desired to describe their motivations for enrolling their student in a virtual charter school, as well as providing open-ended input. The top motivating factor, chosen by 40.6% of respondents, was “Bullying or threats from classmates at other schools.” This choice was followed by “Overcrowding/resource levels at other schools”; “Problems with staff or administration”; “Opportunity for parental involvement”; and “Opportunity for acceleration or remediation” as the most common answers.

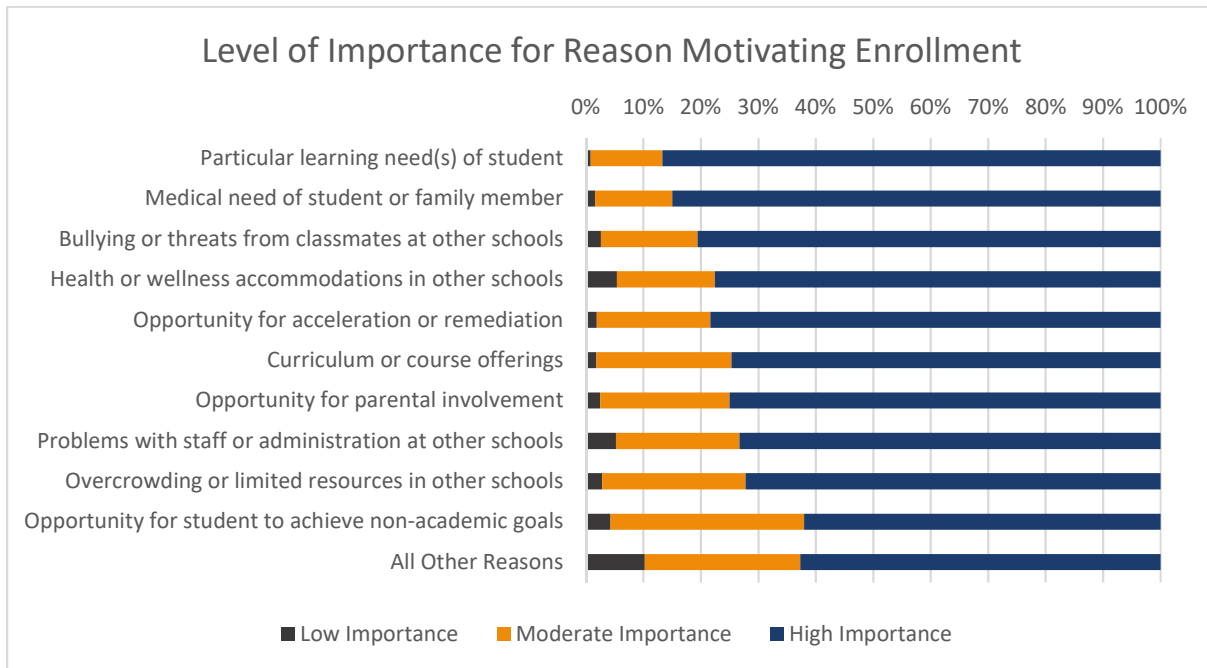
The chart below shows ten reasons that were most frequently selected by survey respondents. In addition, 44.4% of respondents selected an answer outside of the top 10 reasons, including write-in responses. These answers included student disciplinary problems, issues with traveling to other schools, and extracurricular activities that conflict with school. Some frequently selected write-in answers included the quality of education at local public or private schools and specific family situations which required more flexibility.



Interestingly, while “Particular learning need(s) of student” was the 6th most frequently selected reason for enrolling a student in a virtual charter school, it was the reason most often chosen as highly important by those who selected it. This indicates that although other issues may be more immediate reasons for parents and guardians to remove their students from traditional public schools, when parents reflect on which of these reasons is most important, it comes down to the unique learning needs of their students. Medical needs, safety needs, and health or wellness accommodations were also considered to be highly important. While no reasons were considered to be of moderate or low importance by the majority of respondents, non-academic goals, resource levels in other schools, and problems with staff or administration in other schools were not emphasized as being as important as those issues specific to the health, safety, or learning needs of a student.

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Similar thoughts were echoed in open-ended responses, where parents and guardians expressed the need to respond to specific learning needs, maintain flexible schedules, and avail students of high quality educational offerings. A selection of their most common sentiments are displayed in the word cloud and quotes below.

Do you have any other thoughts to share about why your student or students are enrolled in virtual charter schools?



“A quality education, teacher support, a flexible schedule, and curriculum choice.”

“[Other] schools are way too populated with not enough teachers. I feel that my child learns more with virtual schooling.”

“I liked the fact that it is customizable to each child’s learning style.”

“It gives us freedom but keeps us on track with standards at the same time.”

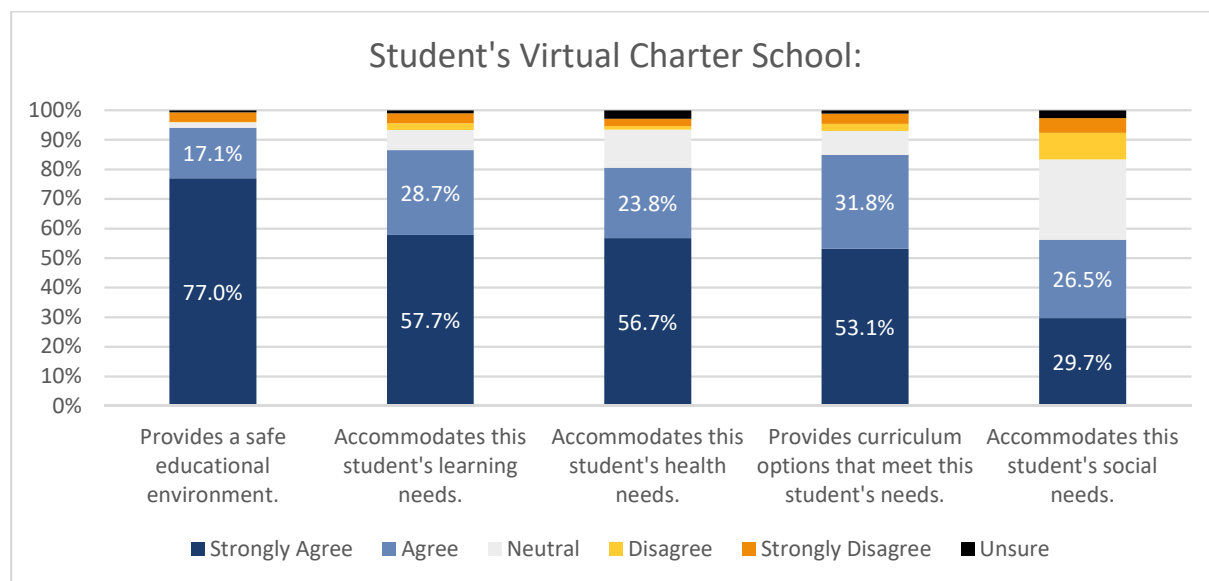
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What Are the Perceived Benefits of Virtual Charter School Attendance?

Respondents felt strongly that virtual charter schools provide a safe educational environment. This is especially important given the number of respondents who selected virtual charter schools in response to safety threats at in-person school environments. The majority of respondents also strongly agreed that their student’s virtual charter school accommodates student learning and health needs, and provides appropriate curriculum options.

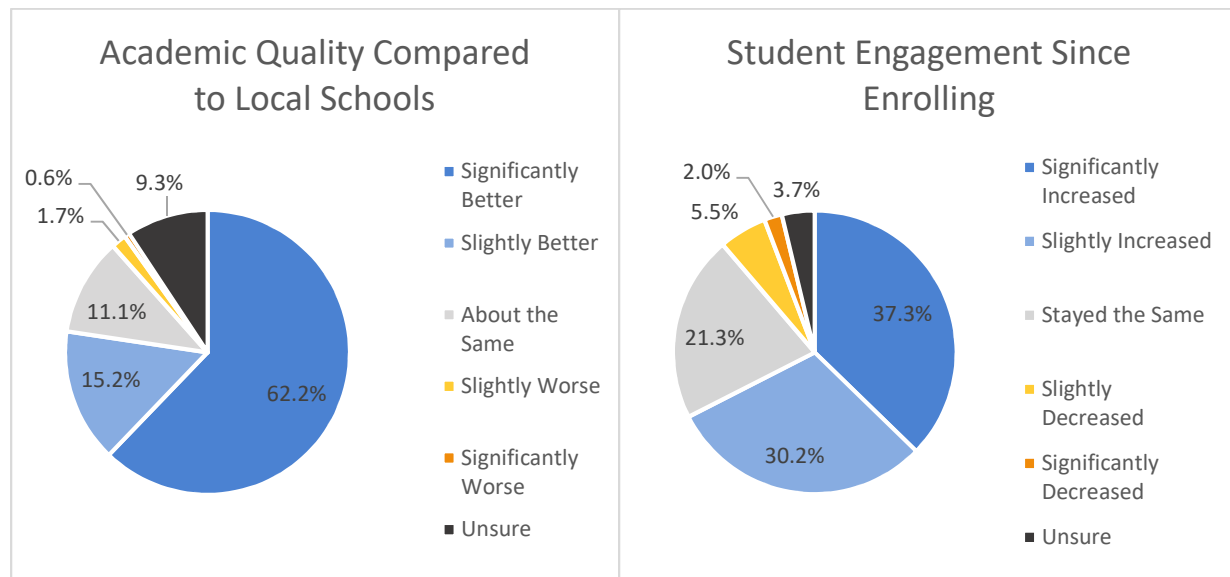
Respondents were less positive about virtual charter schools meeting the student’s social needs. Yet the majority of respondents still reacted positively on whether virtual charter schools accommodate their students’ social needs— 56.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement and just 14.0% disagreed or strongly disagreed.



In addition, respondents were very positive about virtual charter schools’ academic quality, and the changes in their student’s level of engagement since enrolling. Nearly two thirds (62.2%) of respondents said that virtual charter schools are “significantly better” in academic quality compared to local in-person public schools, while just 0.6% said that they were “significantly worse.” Respondents also stated that enrollment in a virtual charter school led to increases in their student’s attention, curiosity, and passion for learning: 67.5% saw an increase in student engagement since joining a virtual charter school, compared to 7.5% who saw a decrease in student engagement.

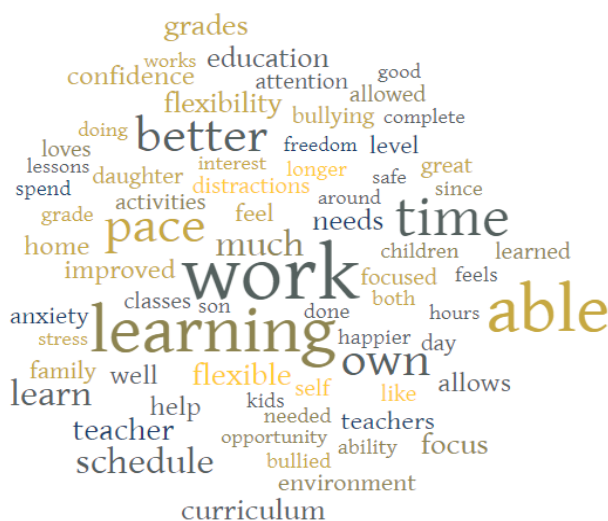
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Open-ended responses provide context about why parents, on the whole, feel that academic quality and student engagement is better in a virtual charter school environment. For many students, virtual charter schools provide an education that is customizable to meet their particular learning needs and interests. Many parents reported the benefits of their child being able to work at his or her own pace, as well as the benefits of being in an environment that is free from distractions or threats. For other families the schedule flexibility was very important, as it allows them to travel together, pursue extracurricular activities, or spend more time together as a family.

How has/have your student(s) benefited from attending a virtual charter school?



“[They] can work at a pace suitable for their learning capacity.”

“We are able to travel for work and stay together as a family.”

“[They have] a deeper learning experience and more time for hands on learning experiences.”

“He is now in a safe environment and is able to concentrate on his school work.”

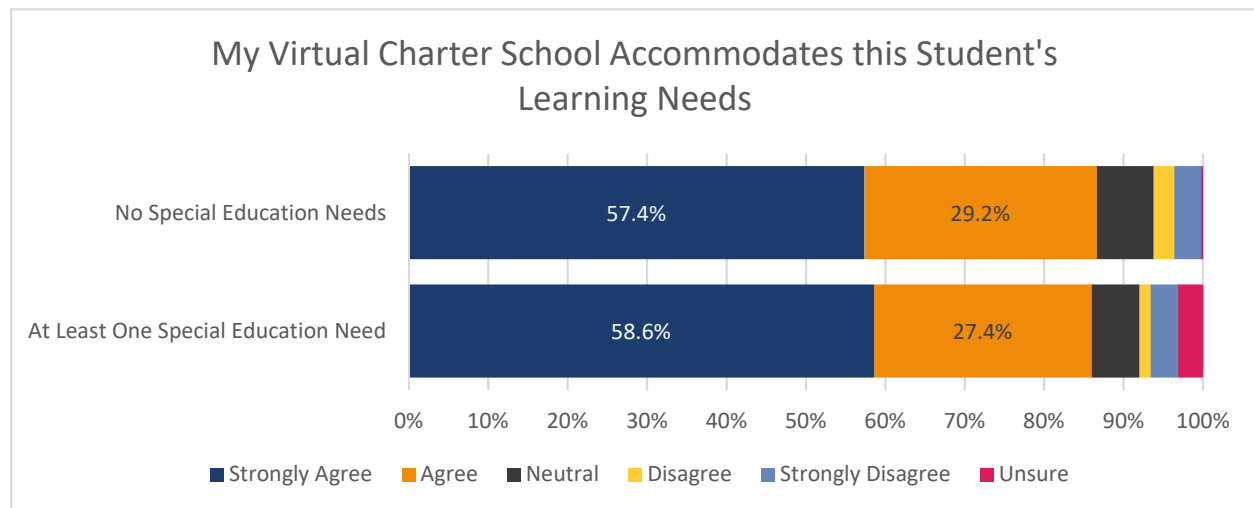
Since such a large number of families are drawn to virtual charter schools due to students’ learning disabilities, it is important to investigate how the experiences of families of students with learning disabilities differ from other families. There are no signs that the benefits of virtual charter schools

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described above differ for students with special education needs. The chart below compares responses about accommodations for students’ learning needs in virtual charter schools between those with no special education needs, and those with at least one need. It shows that while a higher percentage of parents of special education need students are unsure about learning need accommodations, a higher percentage also strongly agree that their virtual charter school is accommodating their students’ needs.

Though not demonstrated with a chart, similar patterns are observed when results between these two groups were compared related to accommodations for safety, health, and social needs. These data indicate that students with special education needs are perceived to benefit just as much from virtual charter schools as those with no special needs.



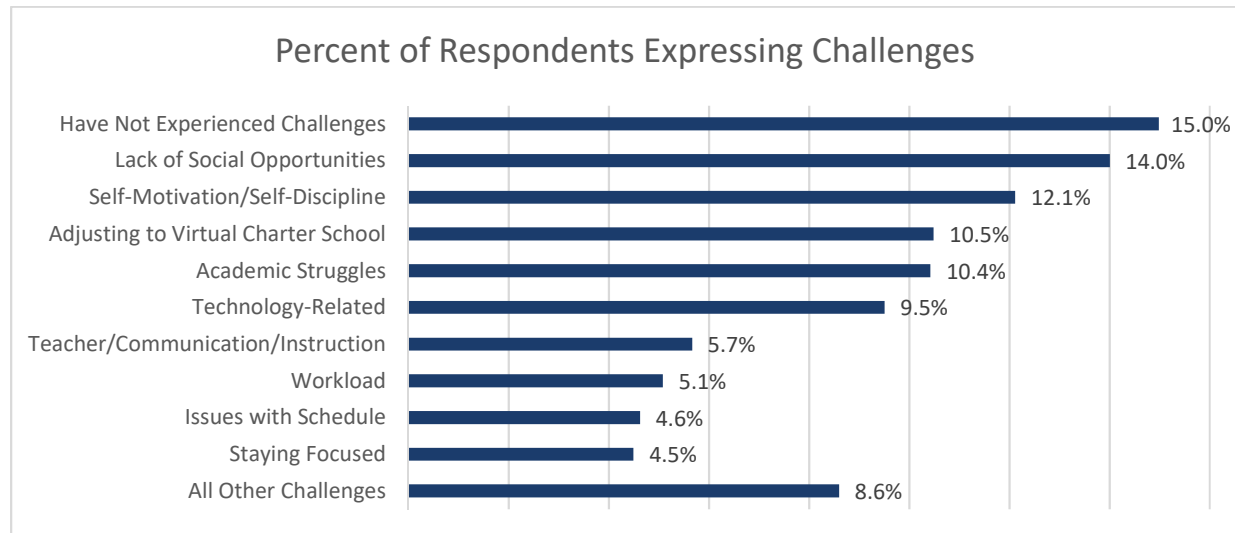
What Are the Challenges Encountered by Students at Virtual Charter Schools?

In addition to benefits students have experienced while attending virtual charter schools, survey respondents were asked to describe challenges their students have faced while attending virtual charter schools. Among those who responded to this open-ended question, the top answer type was that their students have not faced any challenges attending virtual charter school. While this result is a positive indicator of parents’ satisfaction with virtual charter schools, many other respondents did describe challenges that their students have experienced.

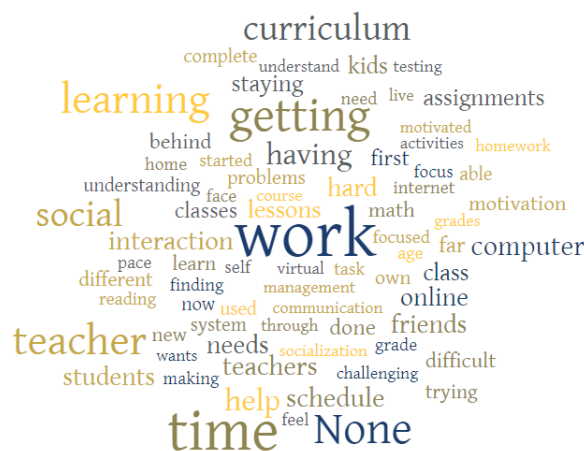
The most common concerns that representatives expressed were lack of social opportunities associated with virtual charter school attendance (14.0% of respondents), followed by self-motivation/self-discipline (12.1%); adjusting to virtual charter schools (10.5%), and academic struggles (10.4%). Nearly 10% of parents also expressed technology issues as a challenge, while no other challenge received more than 6% of responses. Challenges expressed by a low number of respondents included communication issues; workload; systemic issues; learning needs; and school being too easy.

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What challenges has/have your student(s) faced attending a virtual charter school?



“The biggest challenge is not being able to socialize face to face with other students his age.”

“Developing the discipline necessary to manage school responsibilities in a self-directed environment.”

“Finding the right curriculum was a challenge at first.”

“Tougher than classes taken at previous school.”

“He was two weeks behind getting started because of enrollment process. No matter how hard he works he is still two weeks behind.”

There were a few key themes in respondents’ open-ended answers. Not all students respond the same way in virtual charter school settings. While the extra flexibility and independence is helpful for some students, others struggle with the online format and lack of social interaction. These differences were evident within families as well as between them; several parents stated that while one child was adapting well to virtual charter school, another child was struggling. Many respondents felt that the virtual charter school environment requires their student to be more motivated and self-directed, while others expressed that virtual charter schools required increased dedication or assistance from parents or other adults.

In addition, parents had a variety of concerns with the curriculum and technology offerings. Just 0.9% of parents described the curriculum as boring or too easy. Many more said that it was difficult, too much work, or more challenging than other schools (these concerns are captured by “Academic Struggles” 10.4% and “Workload” 5.1%). Still others expressed frustration with poorly-worded curriculum, confusing tests, or glitches in software. Lastly, a common theme was that it is difficult to adjust to the

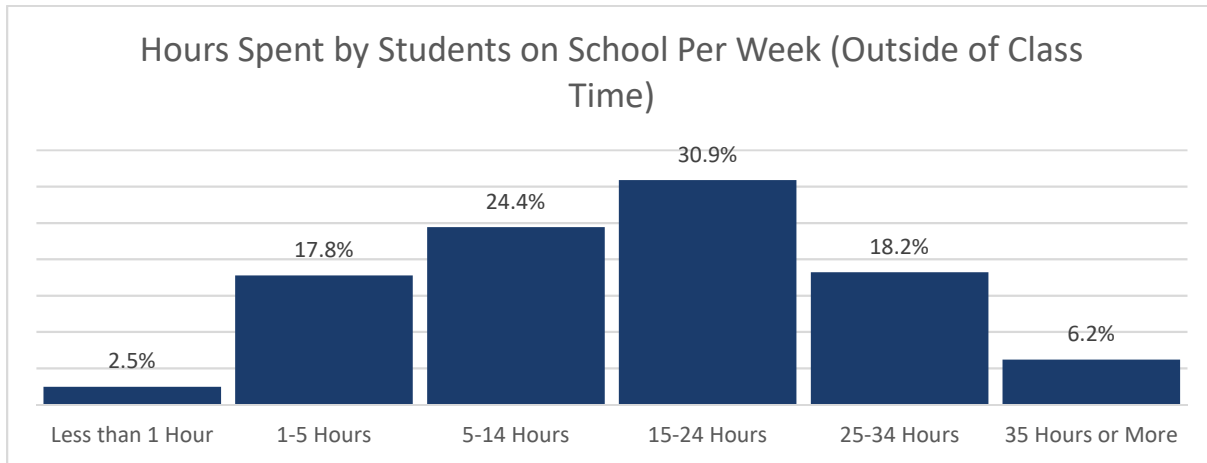
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virtual school environment. Families commonly have challenges managing time and responsibilities when transitioning away from the overall structure provided by brick and mortar schools.

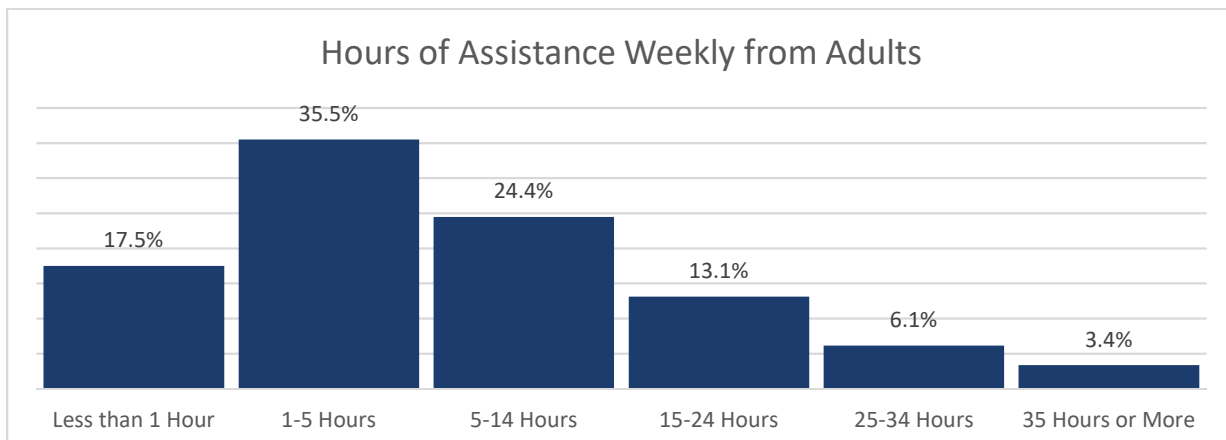
Time Spent on Virtual Charter School Work

In addition to motivations, benefits, and challenges associated with virtual charter school attendance, the survey also asked about time spent on virtual charter school by students, and assistance provided by adults and siblings.



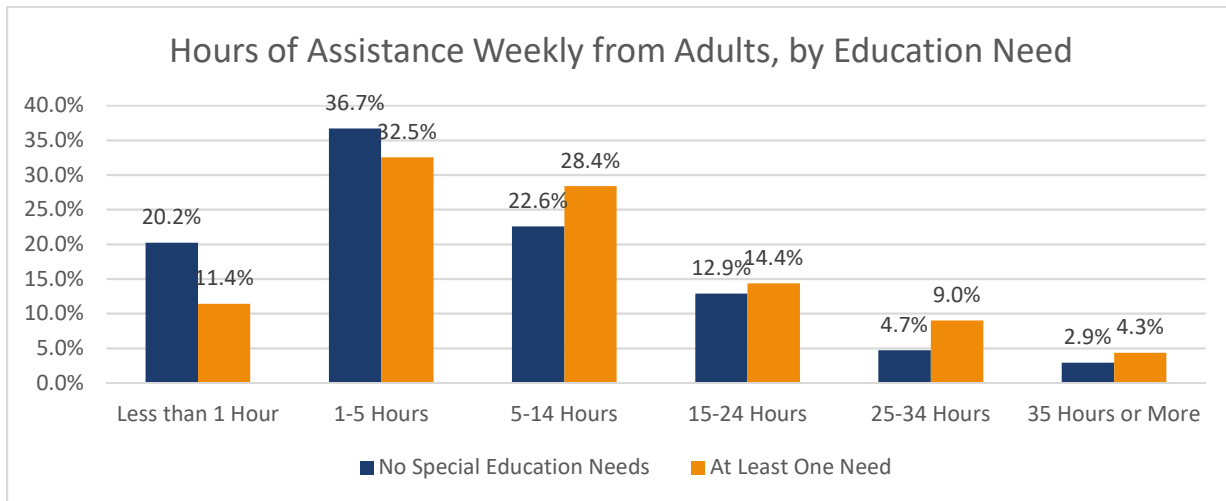
Students most commonly spent between 15 and 24 hours each week on school outside of class time (30.9% of students). Some students spent significantly more time on school work outside of class time, however. In fact, nearly a quarter of students represented in the survey (24.4%) spent more than 24 hours each week on school work outside of class time.

The median amount of time that parents report adults providing educational assistance to the student was between 1 and 5 hours per week (35.5% of students), and 17.5% of respondents stated that their student receives less than 1 hour per week of assistance from adults not affiliated with the virtual charter school, such as parents or guardians. Conversely, 22.6% of students receive 15 or more hours per week of assistance from these adults. In addition, survey results indicate that the time spent by adults providing educational assistance is greater for students who have at least one special education need.

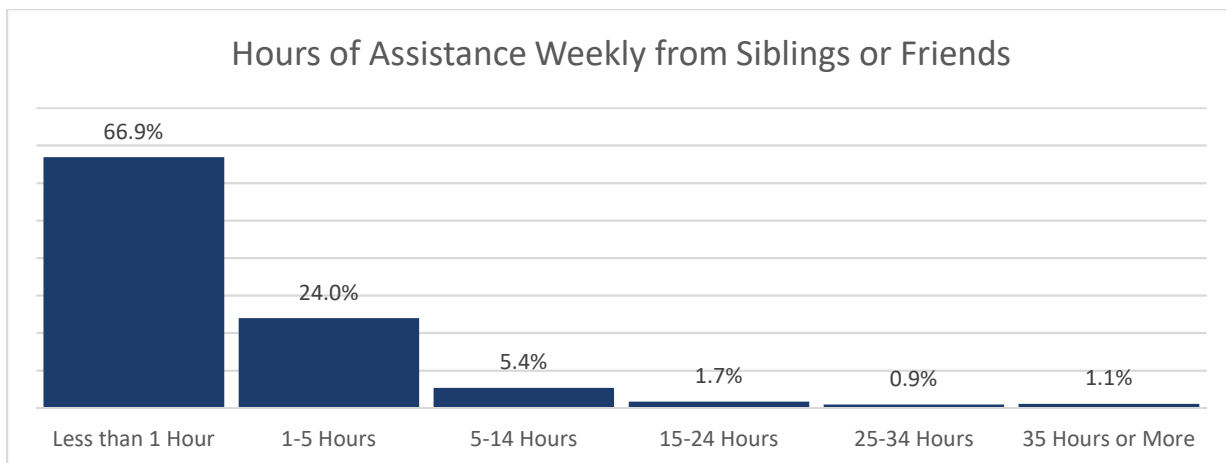


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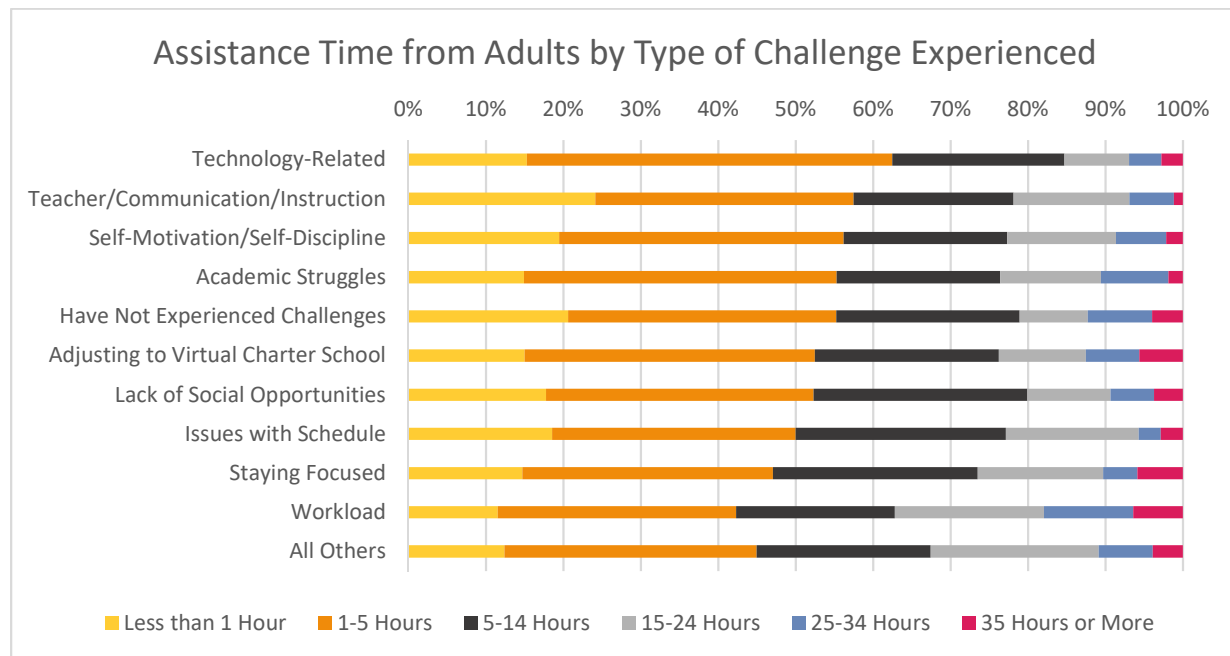
Receiving educational assistance from siblings or friends was much rarer, with 66.9% of respondents stating that their student receives less than 1 hour of this assistance per week. Only 9.1% of students receive more than 5 hours of assistance per week from their siblings or friends.



One may expect that the level and types of challenges experienced by students may be connected to the amount of mentorship and coaching time students receive from adults. In order to test whether these factors are correlated, the chart below displays challenges experienced by students with the amount of assistance time students received from adults. There are clear differences in types of challenges experienced by students in associated with adult assistance hours. It must be emphasized, however, that noting these correlations does not indicate whether a causal relationship exists. The data indicated that adults spent more time providing educational assistance to students who faced challenges with workload, staying focused, and schedule issues. Conversely, adults spent the least amount of time with students who faced challenges with technology, teachers or communication, and self-discipline.

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Miscellaneous Topics Related to Virtual Charter Schools

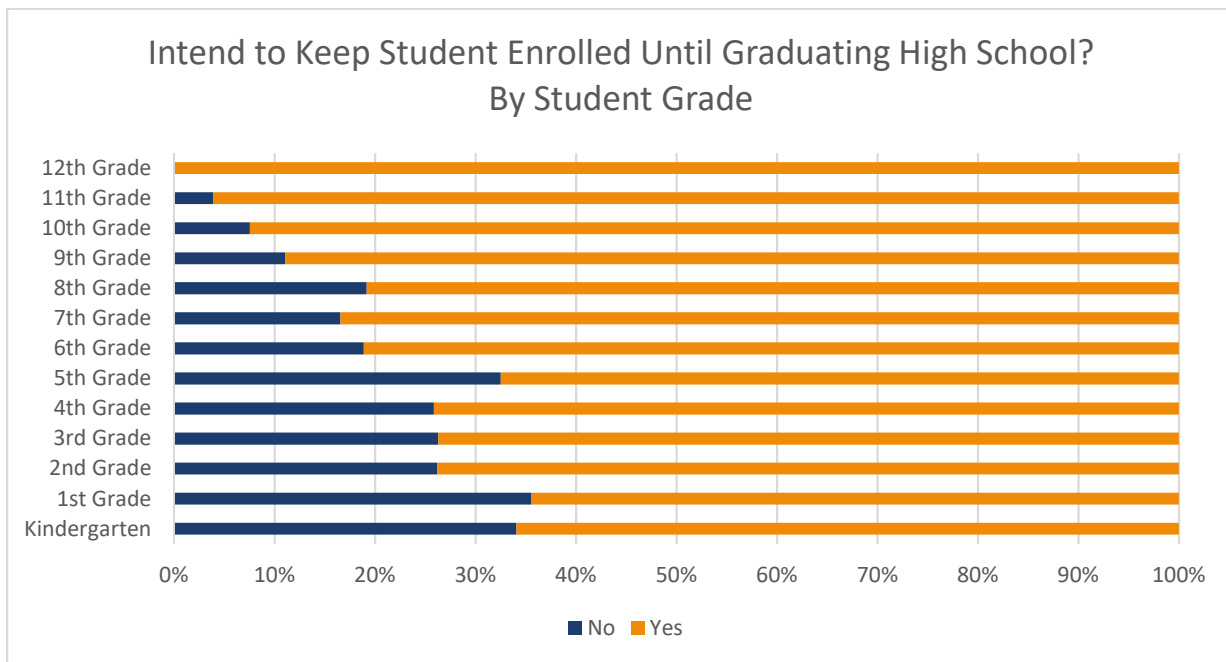
Literature review prior to conducting this survey indicated that in many cases, students in virtual charter schools are less likely to persist in that mode of education until completing their studies.³ In other words, virtual charter school students frequently end up back in traditional public schools, homeschooling, or in private schools.

To test whether respondents plan on utilizing Oklahoma’s virtual charter schools in this way, survey respondents were asked whether they intend to keep their student enrolled in a virtual charter school until they graduate high school. For 82.6% of respondents, the answer was yes, including 100% of parents of 12th grade students. Even among parents or guardians of kindergarten and 1st grade students, more than 60% stated that they do intend to keep their student enrolled in a virtual charter school until graduating high school.

³ James L. Woodworth, et. all, “Online Charter School Study, 2015”, Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, <https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/Online%20Charter%20Study%20Final.pdf>.

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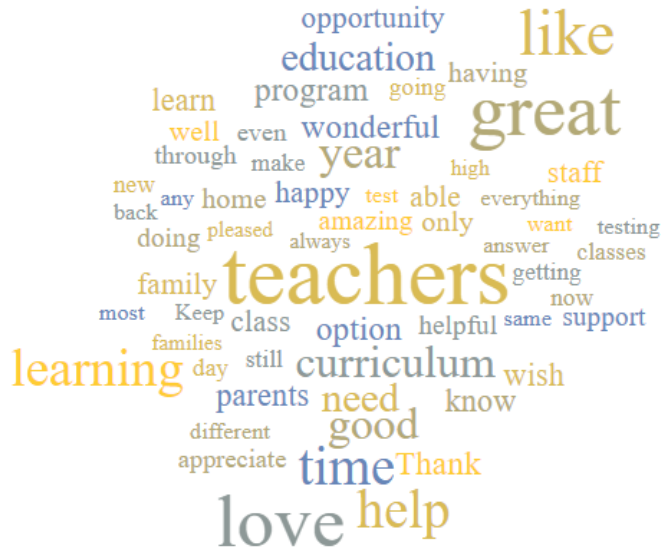


Lastly, survey respondents were asked if there was anything else they wanted to share with the Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board. More people discussed teachers in response to this question than any other topic. However, reactions were mixed: many parents commented that they loved their current teacher, but others commented about communication difficulties with their teacher, having too many students for a teacher to assist, or having insufficient resources for a teacher to perform their job well. In addition, resources like learning funds and extracurricular activities drew conflicting responses. Some families appreciated the learning fund, but others felt that it was not sufficient to cover their family’s needs. In addition, while some families greatly benefited from class outings or events, other families felt they lived too far away to meaningfully connect in this way.

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Is there anything else you would like the Oklahoma [Statewide] Virtual Charter School Board to know about your experience with virtual charter schools?



“Teacher has 40+ students. How can there be quality instruction?”

“I have greatly enjoyed working with our assigned teacher and appreciate all the support and guidance she has provided.”

“Virtual Charter school has given our family the best possible learning environment along with the necessary checks and balances our family needs to keep up with current educational standards.”

“We love the learning fund. I like being part of picking my child's curriculum.”

“My son didn't get any extra in learning fund because of lap top and wifi, and he got put

into the cheapest curriculum which has not been the best. Other parents talk about the extra stuff their kids get with the learning fund, but if a family doesn't have money for internet in their home for their child then their fund goes for that and they don't get any extracurricular activities.”

“Every school district has the right to accept or reject charter school students from participating in the local school sports program. [Rejecting them] makes it so hard, because my child is athletic and wants to participate.”

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Interview Research Summary

Interview Process

In addition to the survey data analyzed above, TPMA conducted interviews with thirteen parents, guardians and learning coaches to investigate their opinions and perspectives on Oklahoma’s virtual charter schools. While the survey provided statistically representative information for the student population in Oklahoma’s virtual charter schools, the interviews added greater depth and nuance to the survey responses. For more details on the interview respondents and the process for conducting interviews see [Appendix A: Methodology](#).

Interviewees drew upon prior experiences from their students attending a variety of schools, including traditional public schools; private schools; and homeschools. One interviewee even had some children enrolled in a traditional public school and other children in virtual charter schools. This variety of experiences provided a rich backdrop for comparing virtual charter schools with other educational options. Additionally, many of the interviewees represented multiple children who were enrolled in virtual charter schools.

In many cases, interviewees contrasted their students’ experiences in virtual charter schools with the brick and mortar public schools that their students previously attended; in other cases, contrasts were drawn between virtual charter schools and brick and mortar schools, in general, which could also include private schools. To keep the contrasts clear, in this report “traditional public schools” refers to public institutions and public charter schools with a physical building where students attend classes, whereas “brick and mortar schools” refers to both public and private schools with a physical building where students attend classes.

Interview Key Themes

To present the findings of interviews, TPMA carefully reviewed notes taken during all the interviews, looking for trends and themes that appeared in two or more of the interviews.

Why Do Families Choose Virtual Charter Schools?

Parents noted a variety of reasons for enrolling their student in a virtual charter school and many noted that the virtual format has unique benefits and barriers.

One interviewee noted that “virtual charter schools are not for everyone.”

Though not all individuals interviewed

were as direct on this topic, it was clear that most believe that virtual charter schools require more intentionality and investment of time from parents than traditional public schools. However, most interviewees did not see this as a deterrent to enrolling because they were prepared to be deeply invested in their children’s education. Interviewees also noted that many virtual charter school parents were initially drawn to virtual charter schools because of the necessary investment of time and

“It’s up to us to do the extra work to educate our children.”

- Virtual charter school parent

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attention that it requires from parents. In the words of one parent: “It’s up to us to do the extra work to educate our children.” Some version of this sentiment is shared by all interviewees.

When asked about reasons for enrolling their students in virtual charter schools, many parents cited a particular problem or negative experience that occurred at a traditional public school where their student was previously enrolled. Of those interviewed, these experiences spanned from specific learning disabilities that were not adequately addressed, to lack of individualized attention, to concerns about morals and ethics among teachers and students at traditional public schools. The following sections will address these themes in greater detail.

Negative Experiences Related to Traditional Public Schools

The most common reason interviewees reported enrolling a student in a virtual charter school was a negative experience in their previous learning environment. However, exactly what that negative experience was varied by interviewee. Some negative experiences included school overcrowding, safety, bullying, inattentive or biased teachers, moral concerns, and inadequately challenging coursework for gifted students. Parents offered the following comments related to their traditional public school experiences.

- A parent shared that while her student was in a traditional public school she would never be called on because she is shy and tends to blend in, but in the virtual charter schools it is easier for teachers get equal involvement from all students.
- A parent relayed a conversation during a parent teacher conference in which the teacher explained that he did not read all of the assignments submitted, but rather he looked to see if the student wrote something on the paper, and if so he would assign an “A.” When pressed about why, the teacher explained that he preferred to spend more time focusing on his other course where he taught gifted and talented students.
- A parent indicated that when she called the local public school to see how she could be involved she was told “no, parents can’t come in and be part of the classroom.”
- A parent was told by the student that the teacher was spending most of her time on the phone when she was in class. The parent confirmed with other parents from the class that other students had said the same thing.
- A parent shared that her former spouse works for and commands considerable respect in the school district where their child would attend. Both the mother and the father agreed that their daughter would not receive a fair or quality education in that district because she would be favored by the educators.

Each of these cases culminated with the children’s parents deciding to enroll their children in virtual charter schools in an effort to find a better educational alternative.

Learning Disabilities

A number of interviewees reported that coping with a learning disability was one of the main reasons they chose to enroll their student in a virtual charter school. These parents reported that their students were extremely distracted in brick and mortar school environments, whereas the virtual charter school environment allowed them to focus on their studies. Furthermore, parents reported that many students

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with learning disabilities felt that they were singled out as “weird” or “different” and/or were bullied in their prior school environment, which exacerbated their difficulty focusing on their education.

“There are so many families out there that just cannot survive in the current brick and mortar system...If your kid isn’t thriving in that environment you need other options.”

-Virtual charter school parent

Some parents whose students struggled in their previous school setting, reported that their students are now thriving in the virtual charter school environment; these parents feel deeply grateful for the virtual charter school option. For example, one parent whose son has a learning disability shared that her son was so frustrated at his traditional public

school that he was contemplating suicide at 10-years old. When he moved into the virtual charter school, it completely changed his life because he no longer felt inferior to other students, and was no longer picked-on by his classmates. He was able to relax and enjoy learning.

More Formal than Homeschooling

Some interviewees had previously homeschooled some of their children. Interviewees with a homeschooling background selected a virtual charter school because it provided a better educational support structure. While they and their students benefited from homeschooling, they did not feel equipped to serve as expert educators on the full range of subjects their students need to learn. Many of these parents also perceived that even if they could provide an equally good education on their own, the education may be perceived as less credible when these students are applying for colleges, as compared to a traditional public school education.

The lower cost of education within the virtual charter schools was also discussed by some parents with homeschooling backgrounds. As a homeschooling parent, curriculum had to be purchased out of their family budget; however, as part of the public school system, virtual charter school curriculum was covered by state public education funds.⁴

What Are the Perceived Benefits of Virtual Charter School Attendance?

Interviewees generally reported that they have a very positive impression of Oklahoma’s virtual charter schools. TPMA asked interviewees to rate their level of satisfaction with their charter school on a scale from one to ten. No respondent answered less than seven and most interviewees responded “nine.” Primary reasons reported for this satisfaction included the rigor and quality of the education, quality of teachers, the flexibility it affords families, the ability to cater curriculum to special needs and different learning styles, and fewer distractions than brick and mortar schools (both public and private). The following sections focus on the benefits that virtual charter school students experience within the system, as reported by interviewees.

⁴ This interviewee, among other interviewees, noted that the virtual charter schools are not completely free to families because parents and guardians still have to pay for paper and ink, internet access, supplementary curriculum, etc.

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Individual Attention on Students

Many interviewees were drawn to the virtual charter schools due to their students’ learning disabilities or other personality issues. Among the group of thirteen interviewees, their students experienced Asperger’s, ADHD, Autism, Dysgraphia, and Dyslexia. A smaller group of interviewees reported that their students have personality issues that make traditional school environments a challenge including separation anxiety, OCD, and general eccentricity.

Parents whose students face learning disabilities or other psychological issues reported that in the virtual charter school environment they are able to better address the unique needs of their students. Interviewees reported this because they believe parents or caretakers understand their students’ needs more deeply than teachers. Furthermore, they felt that teachers in virtual classrooms are more able to accomplish their jobs as they have fewer students’ needs to manage than teachers in traditional school environments.⁵ For example, one mother noted that when her daughter was attending a traditional public school, they were not able to provide supplemental materials for her dyslexic daughter. Now that her daughter is in the virtual charter school, the mother is able to supplement the course curriculum with materials that are customized for her child.

Flexibility & Pace of Studying

One of the greatest features of virtual charter schools, as reported by interviewees, is that students can customize their schedules to fit their needs rather than having to follow the same schedule on a daily basis. For students who are involved in extracurricular activities, this is a noteworthy advantage over traditional brick and mortar schools, according to interviewed parents. One parent whose child is a performing musician commented that “it takes time to travel, perform, and move equipment, so the flexibility is nice.” Another parent commented that both of the adults in her household travel and move frequently for their jobs, so a virtual charter school option means that these travels do not interfere with education of their children.

Interviewees reported appreciating that virtual charter school students can progress at their own pace. The ability to self-pace is helpful both for students who move quickly and for students who require more time to digest information.

Fewer Distractions

The majority of interviewees mentioned that students being better able to focus on their education was a distinct benefit to the virtual charter schools. Distractions can take many forms, from bullying, to other students social lives, to classroom noises. Interviewees reported one of the main benefits of their students attending a virtual charter school was that they were able to better focus on their school work than they were in other school settings. Not having other children in the same room during lectures or learning times decreased the number of distractions present for students and allowed them to stay focused throughout the day.

⁵ There is not consensus on this point, however, and it should be noted that the survey revealed opinions of some parents who felt that teachers in virtual charter schools are asked to manage too many students

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Multiple interviewees commented that the lack of social distractions in the virtual environment seems to have a positive effect on classroom interactions as well. For some, in traditional schools their children were almost never called on because they were shy, unusual, or unpopular. But in the virtual classrooms, without the distraction of outward appearances, it is easier for students to interact with teachers and for teachers to facilitate participation with all students.

Quality Curriculum

Multiple interviewees indicated that the curriculum was more rigorous than what was offered at traditional public schools. They noted that this may be because students need to demonstrate understanding of the material before they are permitted to move on to the next module.

In addition to the curriculum, many interviewees also lauded the quality of teachers in the virtual charter schools. These interviewees mentioned that their students have a particular teacher whose passion and expertise generates enthusiasm for their students. In addition to their teaching duties, interviewees appreciated that oftentimes teachers will check-in by email and instant messenger to see if the students are absorbing the curriculum.

Though several interviewees reported that they wished testing requirements were further loosened within the virtual charter schools, they praised their schools for focusing less on preparation for tests and more on curriculum that is interesting for their children. One parent reported that they felt that in the virtual charter school there is much less “teaching to the test” than in traditional schools.

What Are the Challenges Encountered by Students at Virtual Charter Schools?

Interviewees noted that the challenges they had with virtual charter schools were similar to some of the challenges they had experienced in other educational environments. For example, they reported challenges helping students with the personal organization, motivation, time management and good study habits.

It was routinely mentioned that the virtual charter school environment requires adaptation on behalf of both students and their families. Compared to traditional public schools, virtual charter schools are far less structured in terms of monitoring when and how students are working. Interviewees and students utilized a number of tactics to help adjust to this change, which are mentioned throughout this section. Other specific challenges noted by interviewees included using technology, the lack of social and extracurricular outlets available to students, and coping with the degree of regulations required within the virtual charter schools. Further details on these challenges are outlined in greater depth in the following sections.

Use of Technology

Some interviewees indicated that using technology in a purely virtual environment is a challenge for their students. Using a computer and using the online learning programs requires organizational skills and technical skills that have a learning curve for families and students. For example, one interviewee mentioned that it was difficult, at first, to figure out in the online system how the student was supposed to submit completed assignments. Other technology challenges mentioned were more systemic. For

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example, another interviewee indicated that for her student, reading exclusively from e-books was a difficult adjustment as the student learned better reading from hard-copy books.

Additionally, parents reported that students enrolled in virtual charter schools have to sit at a single computer for six or more hours per day to complete their school work. The monotony of staying focused on school without socializing with peers or getting physical exercise by walking from class to class is a challenge. To off-set the consistency of the routine, parents reported that their students take breaks to interact with other family members or do other activities, additionally, some may go work in different places inside their home for a change of scenery.

Social & Extracurricular Activities

Some families reported that they have not had a problem finding social and extracurricular activities for their students to participate in, but for other families, especially those in rural areas, this is reported to be a considerable challenge. One interviewee whose student no longer attends a virtual school indicated that missing out on extracurricular activities was among the primary reasons that their student eventually enrolled in a traditional public school. Families and students who enjoy and thrive in virtual charter schools find a way to replace these options with other social activities such as family get-togethers, amateur sports, and various club activities.

Rules & Regulations

A number of interviewees emphasized that the degree of test taking, and test preparation required of students is a detriment to their student’s excitement, growth and learning. While state testing requirements are not unique to virtual charter schools, the state’s testing requirements were brought up as one of the most consistent and notable frustration for families of virtual charter school students. Interviewees with this perspective believed that, in general, the education system should require less standardized testing. Yet on a positive note, one interviewee emphasized that the amount of time spent on test coaching and preparation is considerably lower within the virtual charter schools.

“Applying the same six hours per day regulations on virtual school as a brick-and-mortar school does not make sense. The actual learning time is so much higher for those in a virtual environment.”

-Virtual charter school parent

Another common theme related to regulations is that some interviewees are frustrated by how much time their students are required to remain sitting in front of a computer screen in order meet state requirements. In the words of one parent: “applying the same six hours per day regulations on virtual school as a brick-and-mortar school does not make sense. The actual learning time is so much higher for those in a virtual environment.”

Other rules that are not state-applied proved to be a challenge for interviewees. In particular, multiple interviewees believed that the virtual charter school mandated virtual meetings and homework sessions are not helpful, and they can also interfere with other family schedules. Doing homework or tutoring sessions at set times can prove to be a difficulty for families who are accustomed to managing education on their own schedules.

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Conclusion

Overall, parents and guardians mentioned many of the same motivations, benefits, and challenges in both the survey and interviews. However, some factors that were highlighted as crucial by interviewees were not commonly cited by survey respondents. Combining broad quantitative insights from survey results and detailed qualitative insights from interview results provides a comprehensive view of parents’ and guardian’s perspectives on Oklahoma’s virtual charter schools.

In both the survey and interview responses, many parents or guardians cited their motivation for enrolling in a virtual school stemmed from an issue in a non-virtual school: these included safety concerns, school overcrowding, education quality, and staff or teacher involvement. Other common motivations were desires for increased parental involvement in education, and particular academic or learning needs of students. In addition, interview results revealed that families coming from homeschool backgrounds may move to virtual charter schools for increased structure and resources, while survey results also emphasized factors like students’ personal goals, medical needs, and opportunities for flexible schedules.

In both interviews and surveys, parents described many benefits their students experienced from attending virtual charter schools. Overall, parents described significant education benefits in terms of learning accommodations, curriculum quality, and flexibility. However, these methods did lead to some small differences in the benefits that parents highlighted. For example, survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that virtual charter schools provide a safe educational environment and accommodate health needs, while interviewees emphasized the lack of distractions and individual attention provided by virtual charter schools.

While the families consulted in interviews and surveys were generally positive about their experiences with virtual charter schools, families experienced some common challenges as well. Common challenges voiced by both survey and interview respondents included a lack of social opportunities in virtual charter schools and issues with technology that negatively impacted the educational experience. Many survey respondents expressed that their students struggled with self-discipline and motivation, but this was not emphasized by interviewees. Interviewees and—to a lesser degree—survey respondents did express issues with rules and regulations, such as test taking and screen time requirements. Lastly, some survey respondents expressed feeling overwhelmed by the virtual charter experience as a whole. Among these concerns were the amount of work required, struggles to adjust to the virtual charter school, issues communicating with teachers or administrators, and issues with the curriculum or technical interface.

Despite these concerns, the overall feedback received was that virtual charter schools offer a combination of educational benefits that meet the needs of many Oklahoma families. There are areas in which virtual charter schools can improve their services, such as technical interfaces, social offerings, and responsiveness to parents’ issues as they arise. However, the overwhelming majority of parents and guardians consulted in the survey and interviews expressed that virtual charter schools offer a high-quality education and provide benefits not offered by in-person public schools.

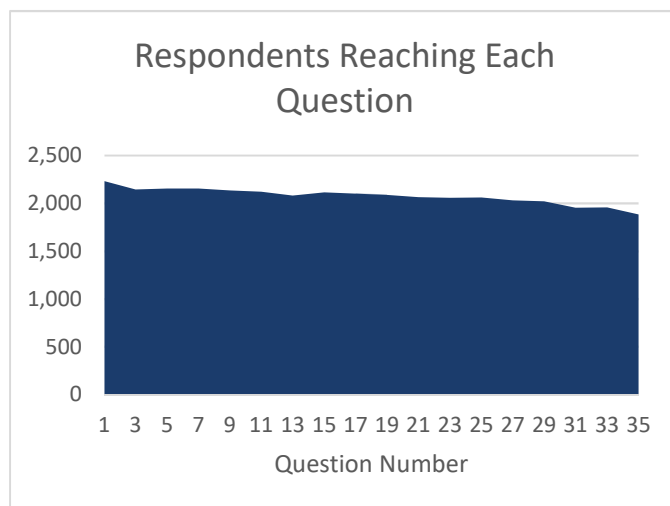
Appendix A: Methodology

Survey Methodology

The purpose of the survey was to engage parents or guardians of all virtual charter students about their perspectives on the research questions. In response to these questions, TPMA developed a thirty-five-question survey with a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions. This survey was developed and tested internally by TPMA staff to ensure that questions were clear, answers were inclusive, and the survey could be completed in the expected time. It was then vetted and tweaked by the OSVCSB and virtual charter school leaders to make sure that the survey addressed their goals and was worded correctly for the virtual charter school context.

Once approved, the survey was administered online using the SurveyMonkey platform and promoted via email to all parents and guardians of students at Epic Charter School, Insight School of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Connections Academy, and Oklahoma Virtual Charter Academy. Surveys were sent directly from administrators at each school with pre-scripted messages describing the purpose and contents of the survey. After the initial promotion on October 11th, the survey was promoted two additional times before closing on October 25th.

In response to these emails, TPMA gathered a total of 2,794 responses. However, these results included a number of duplicate responses, as well as respondents who indicated that they did not have a student in virtual charter schools. After survey data was cleaned to remove repeat entries and filter out respondents who did not claim to have a student at a virtual charter school, 2,232 qualified respondents remained. Of these 2,232 respondents, participants were deemed to have completed the survey if they finished three-quarters of the questions. A total of 2,021 respondents met this threshold, as shown in the chart to the right.



In order to analyze the survey, TPMA tabulated answers to multiple choice questions in Microsoft Excel. For open-ended answers, TPMA coded respondents’ answers into the most common themes based on keywords and common sentiments. Location data was drawn from a question about respondents’ zip codes. These zip codes were mapped using Geographic Information Systems software, and matched to U.S. census urban/rural designations using concordance data from the Missouri Census Data Center.⁶

⁶ Missouri Census Data Center. (2014). 5-digit ZIP/ZCTA: ZIP Census Tab. Area 2010 to Urbanized Area/Urban Cluster 2012 for the state of Oklahoma. Retrieved from <http://mcdc.missouri.edu/websas/geocorr14.html>.

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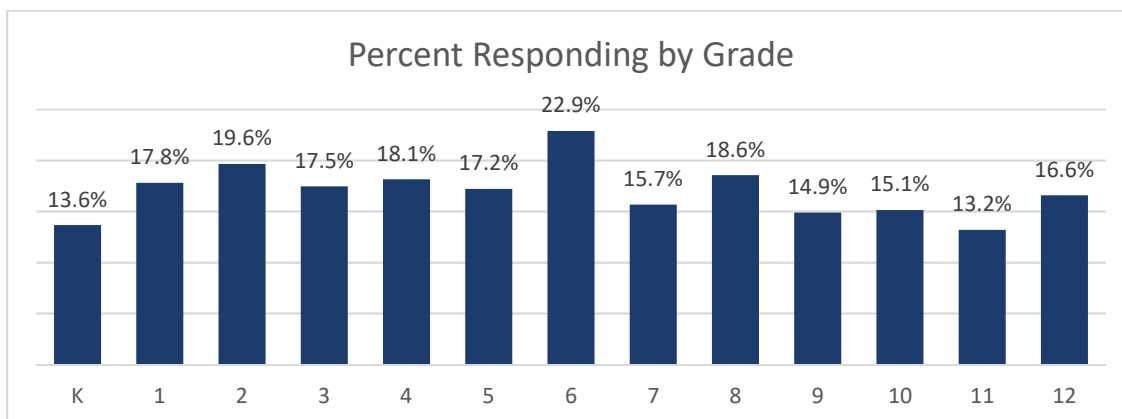
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Representativeness of Survey

A total of 2,021 qualified respondents completed the survey. Based on the total 2017-2018 virtual charter school enrollment in Oklahoma, this represents a nearly 17.0% response rate. Given this response, we can be 95% confident that our survey results represent the true population opinions within a 2% margin of error. Assuming that the demographic makeup of virtual charter school students has not drastically changed between 2016-17 and 2017-18, the responses were representative of the population.

When the demographic makeup of respondents was compared to the virtual charter school population, respondents were found to represent the population well for grade level, school, and race/ethnicity. However, while the same types of special education needs occurred the most frequently in the survey results as the total school population, special education needs were more common overall in the students included in the survey.

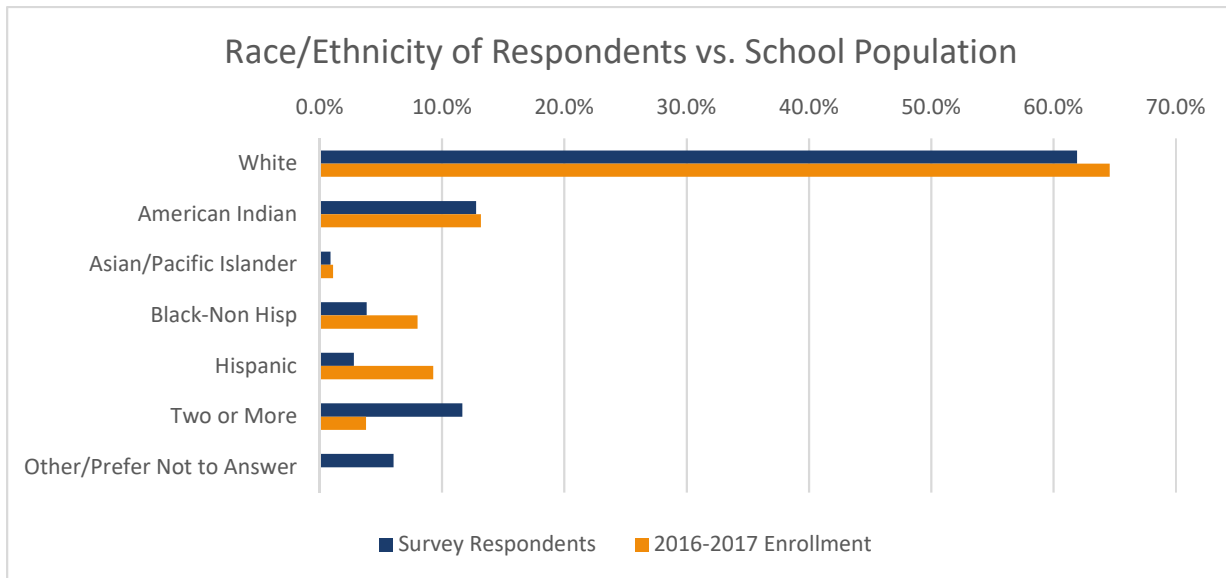
Based on 2016-2017 virtual charter school enrollment, at least 13.0% of each grade’s total student population was captured in the survey results. This gives a high degree of statistical validity to survey responses across all grade levels. The highest response rate was for families of 6th graders, while the lowest response rate was for families of 11th graders.



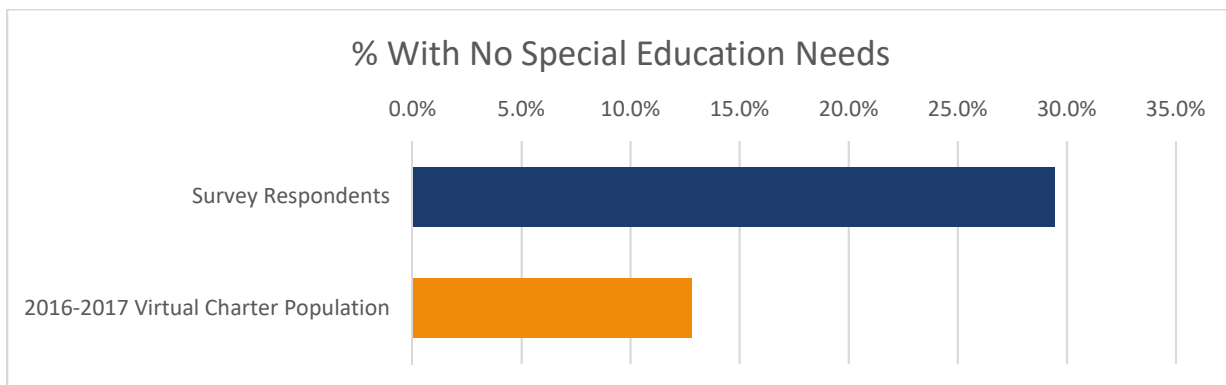
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In addition, the distribution of respondents by race or ethnicity matches the school population for White, American Indian, and Asian/Pacific Islander. However, respondents’ students were more likely than the virtual school population to be Two or More races than Black or Hispanic.

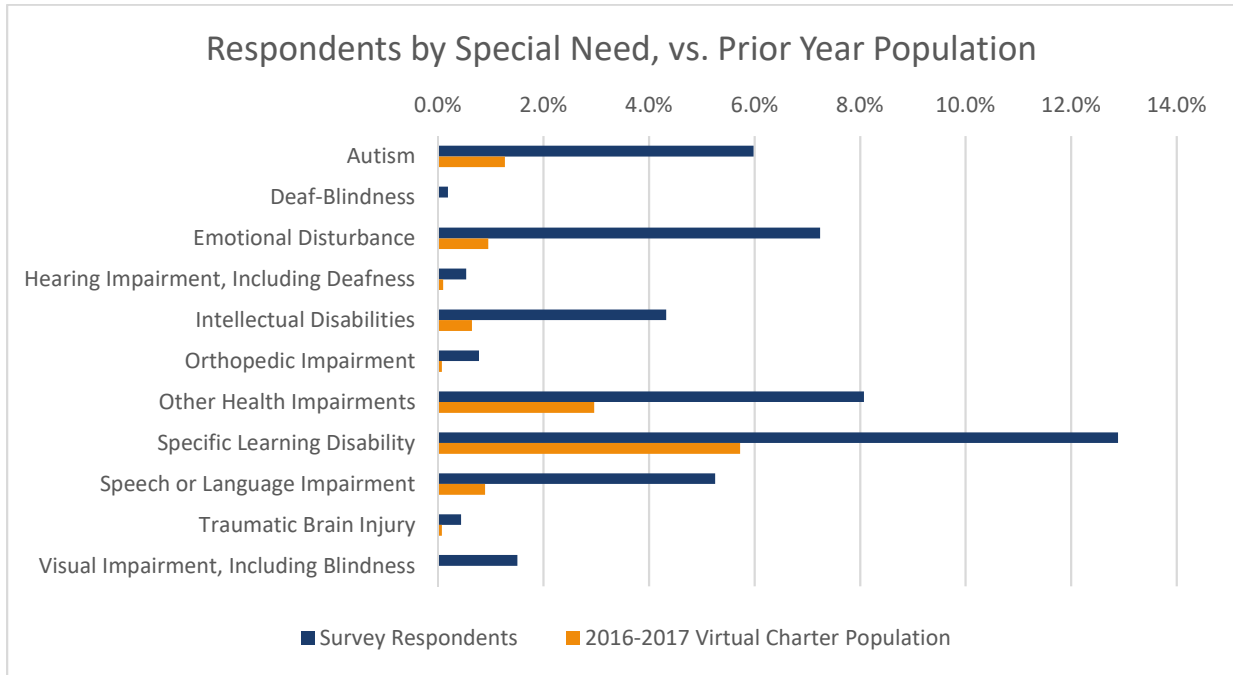


While survey responses roughly characterized the virtual charter school student population overall, there were some differences in the portions of respondents with special needs. For example, while only 12.8% of the 2016-2017 virtual charter school population reported a special education need, 29.5% of 2017 survey respondents reported at least one need. This difference could be due to an increase in portion of virtual charter school students who have special education needs in the 2017-2018 school year, or due to families of students with special education needs being more likely to respond to the survey or select the student in their household who has special needs as the focus of their survey response. Among the responses for students with special education needs, however, the selected needs are proportional to those in the school population. In both the survey and the school population, specific learning disabilities are the most common, followed by other health impairments, emotional disturbance, and autism.



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Interview Methodology

About the Interviews

TPMA asked interviewees a series of eight open-ended questions about their experiences with virtual charter schools (see the Interview Questionnaire Template below). Whenever possible, questions were sent to interviewees in advance of the interview, so they were allowed time to reflect on experiences and consider their answers prior to the discussion.

TPMA targeted a distribution of responses that roughly mirrored the distribution of students in Oklahoma’s virtual charter schools according to 2016-17 Academic Year enrollment data. Ultimately more parents/guardians from Oklahoma Virtual Charter Academy participated in interviews than from the other schools. However, since the questions were focused on the virtual charter school experience in general, this distribution likely did not bias the sample of interviewees.

School Name	2017-18 Enrollment, Percentage of All OSVCS Enrollment	Number of Interviews Completed
Epic Charter School	68.9%	3
Oklahoma Virtual Charter Academy	18.4%	5
Oklahoma Connections Academy	9.5%	3
Insight School of Oklahoma	3.1%	2

Source: TPMA and Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board

TPMA Interview Questionnaire Template

1. How many students in your family attend virtual charter schools?
 - a. Which school(s) do they attend?
2. How long have you had a student in an Oklahoma virtual charter school?
3. What motivated you to enroll your student(s) in _____ school?
 - a. Why did you select this/these particular virtual charter school(s)?
 - b. If you looked at other virtual schools, how did you decide between them?
4. On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is low, how would you rate your satisfaction with _____ school?
 - a. Why did you select this rating?
5. What do you particularly like about _____ school?
6. What challenges has your student(s) experienced attending _____ school?
7. Are there any ways in which _____ school could better meet your student’s needs?
8. Any final thoughts on your family’s experience with _____ school?